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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Genre and Originality

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “The Purloined Letter”:

Purloined, *adj.*

Stolen; filched

Cant, *n.*

1. The special words and phrases used by those in a certain sect, occupation, etc.; *jargon*
2. Insincere or almost meaningless talk used merely from convention or habit

Prodigious, *adj.*

1. Wonderful; amazing
2. Of great size, power, extent, etc.; enormous; huge

Acumen, *n.*

Keeness and quickness in understanding and dealing with a situation; shrewdness

In *ABC of Reading* (1934), Ezra Pound identifies and ranks six categories of writers, of which the highest two are: “1. Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process” and “2. The masters. Men who combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well as or better than the inventors.”

With “The Fall of the House of Usher,” we could place Poe within the second category, as a master who built upon the work of others to bring an existing tradition to an even higher level. But with the three Dupin stories—“The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” and “The Purloined Letter”—he unquestionably climbs into the first category. In these three tales, Poe single-handedly created the detective story, fashioned a template whose basic elements have defined the genre for over a century and a half, and produced three highly ingenious works of fiction that continue to delight readers.

?? Discussion Activities

According to Kenneth Silverman, author of *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*, “Poe had few if any precedents for such ‘tales of ratiocination,’ as he called what he attempted. . . . But crime was much in the air, as its prevention became a pressing urban need. . . . Poe understatedly called ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’ ‘something in a new key.’ In fact, few other works can claim its authority in giving rise to a new popular genre and settings its conventions. At the time Poe wrote, the word *detective* did not exist in English, and for many readers his story had the delight of profound novelty: ‘it proves Mr Poe to be a man of genius,’ said the *Pennsylvania Inquirer*” (pp. 171, 173–74).

In creating the now popular genre of detective fiction, Poe very cleverly balanced the elements of the tale. The solution of the mystery is of crucial interest and importance, but some of the story’s appeal lies in characterization and in the interplay of the personalities. Ask the students which element of the story they found more entertaining: the mystery and its solution, or Dupin and his interactions with the narrator and Monsieur G?

Writing Exercise

More than the desire to see justice done or even the personal satisfaction of his intellectual triumph, Dupin is motivated by personal revenge. Have the students write a brief essay considering whether this motivation makes the story more satisfying, or less, than it would otherwise be.

Homework

Read “Ligeia” (pp. 33–54). Ask students to list any connections between the story and others of Poe’s works.